

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

28 April 2015

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Not peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Foulds, F.W.F. (2012) 'Book review of 'The death of archaeological theory?' edited by John Bintliff and Mark Pearce, Oxford : Oxbow Books, 2011.', Archaeological review from Cambridge., 27 (2). pp. 209-214.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.societies.cam.ac.uk/arc/issues/issue27.2.html>

Publisher's copyright statement:

Additional information:

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

Book Reviews

Edited by Katie Hall

The Death of Archaeological Theory? Edited by John Bintliff and Mark Pearce

2011. Oxford: Oxbow
Pbk, 89pp. 9 B/w illus.
ISBN: 978-1-84217-446-3

Reviewed by Frederick WF Foulds
Department of Archaeology, Durham University

This rather slim but surprisingly expansive edited volume is the culmination of a provocative session from the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists in Krakow, 2006. Comprising a total of six papers, plus a thought provoking introduction, the concept of the 'death of theory' is framed around Barthes' (1967: 142–8) critique of theory within literary studies. It touches on the history, progression, and current concerns of archaeological theory within the British, American and European schools of thought, but primarily seeks to focus on the future of theory within the discipline.

Bintliff and Pearce, the co-editors of the volume, provide a succinct introduction that summarizes the collected papers well and expounds on the overarching conclusions of the book; namely that the reader must cast off the shackles of a singular theoretical paradigm in order to pursue a more eclectic, democratic and reflexive approach to their use of theory within archaeology. Bintliff continues to build on these concepts within the first paper of the book, using extensive quotations from theoretical works to outline the slide from Clarke's (1968) cyclical method of comparing models with the developing evidence, to the point where theorists demand that their ideology is the *right* way to interpret the past. He concludes by suggesting that we begin to free ourselves from using singular *ideological* approaches and, instead, aim to incorporate a multitude of models and method in order to provide more intuitive links between ideas and archaeological patterns.

Flannery and Marcus' paper provides a brief insight from the New World, where archaeological theory is considered to be a conglomeration of perspectives borrowed from other fields. Thus, they argue, archaeological theory is unable to truly die, given that it never actually existed in the first place. Using anthropology as their primary focus, they reinforce their perspective and demonstrate the informative nature of interdisciplinary discourse through two case studies, which indicate how archaeological and anthropological studies feed back into one another and, thus, enhance their overall interpretive value. For them, therefore, a true calamity would be the death of anthropological theory, which they equate with the increasing anti-scientific nature of current dialogue.

Following this, Pluciennik seeks to examine how intellectual 'fashions' stemming from a broad range of contexts, such as the socio-political, historical and cultural arenas, have influenced the major shifts in theoretical approaches. Although he does not appear to embrace a definite stance on the matter, Pluciennik quotes heavily from the literature in a manner similar to Bintliff to illustrate his discussion, which suggests how present day concerns filter into and reorientate at least some of our theoretical perspectives, as opposed to internal drivers, a tendency

perpetuated by the valorisation of the new over repartition of the old. His conclusions, while not explicitly supporting the idea of a 'death of theory', indicate the view that it is the disparity and incompatibility of many theoretical approaches that may result in any future demise.

Here the book moves to the Central European Archaeology (CEA) with Gramsch's noteworthy contribution, orientated from the viewpoint of the German tradition. Excellently written and supported by numerous references, Gramsch provides a well-rounded description that is definitely recommended as an introduction for those who are unfamiliar with the CEA and its apparent atheoretical approach to archaeology. However, Gramsch's discussion does not overtly focus on the 'death of theory'—a function of his standpoint in a tradition that lacks a 'theoretical archaeology'—but rather the call for a more homogeneous mixture of method and theory that emphasizes reflexivity as a new theoretical model to address the balance between overt ideology and archaeological practice.

This is followed with a short paper by Kristiansen, which provides a stark contrast to Gramsch's as well as the other papers throughout the volume. In parts clearly bordering on the ideology that Bintliff encourages us to abandon, it argues that theory will not die, but simply change its direction, as it has done with previous paradigm shifts. He argues that we are now beginning to see a move away from the post-processual cycle towards a more scientific and rationalistic approach, driven by advances in science based analysis and echoing Trigger's (2006) predictions of a more pragmatic school of thought. Despite its cogency, it is slightly worrying that Kristiansen uses a multitude of apparently unreferenced statements to support the main body of his thesis, which for some may lead to more questions than the answers that he seeks to provide. Where references do exist, these are to Kristiansen's own work, and it must be assumed that the support for the statements that he makes can be found there instead. However, the paper is thought provoking and will no doubt rile up those caught within the post-processual mindset.

For the final paper, we return to Bintliff's co-editor, Pearce, who suggests that theory has become *bricolage* (*sensu* Lévi-Strauss 1966) and echoes the call for us to move away from the aged concept of theoretical paradigms into a new, eclectic and open approach to theorizing about archaeology. It also provides a fine epilogue to the proceedings, summarizing and referring back to several of the other papers collected within the pages of the book.

Overall, this volume sits comfortably amongst, and fills a much-needed niche within, the burgeoning number of debates surrounding archaeological theory. As Jones (2002) notes, there has been a bifurcation of the archaeological discipline into "two cultures"; the objective and subjective, or the scientific and the theoretical. While both of these perspectives enable the archaeologist to extract substantial information from exceptionally fragmentary evidence, the dichotomy that has developed has resulted in numerous arguments regarding the manner in which archaeology should be practiced (Millson 2010). It appears to be a common theme within this volume that the gap between the scientific and theoretical should be closed, in order to enable the reflexive, cyclical, democratic and overall pragmatic approach to the interpretation of the archaeological record. It is especially relevant as one of the very few publications that attempt to address a hotly debated topic, given the recent discussion of the 'death of theory' at several conferences, including TAG 2009 and 2011, where the call to throw out the dogmatic theory and ideology that has been the defining feature within the archaeological debates of the past twenty-five years has been greatly discussed. In addition, the papers are presented in a clear and approachable way that avoids an overly aggressive and peremptory method of laying out their ideas, something that is not often seen in volumes that encompass archaeological theory.

Nevertheless, I would offer some small criticisms. Few of the collected papers tie directly back to Bintliff and Pearce's staunch call for a more eclectic and reflexive approach and there is a tendency towards a repetitious analysis of the history of archaeological thought throughout,

despite the contributors doing so to support their own line of argument. The fact that the papers could be considered slightly disconnected, however, may simply be a reflection of the current state of the debate, given that no new theoretical paradigm appears to be on the immediate horizon. This is by no means a bad thing, given that growth of knowledge, as well as the development and evolution of academic interests, is common to all disciplines (Preucel & Mrozowski 2010), providing evidence of healthy debate and the reflexivity that the volume is calling for. In addition, while most of the contributions are written and expressed clearly, as with all debates, there is an inevitable slide into the murkier waters of theoretical jargon in some papers, which those who do not have a developed background in theoretical debates may find confusing and disorientating.

Despite these minor issues, *The Death of Archaeological Theory?* provides a welcome addition to the literature, and the provision of a wide number of perspectives within such a small volume, including examples of theoretical discourse from areas outside of the British school of thought, must be applauded. This is definitely recommended reading for all those interested in the current state of archaeological theory and what future path it may follow.

References

- Barthes, R. 1967. The Death of the Author. *Aspen*: 5–6 [Reprinted in R. Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 142–148. Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath, 1977. London: Fontana Press].
- Clarke, D. L. 1968. *Analytical Archaeology*. London: Methuen
- Jones, A. 2002. *Archaeological Theory and Scientific Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1966. *The Savage Mind (La pensée sauvage)*. London: Weidenfield and Nicholson
- Millson, D. C. E. 2010. Introduction. In D. C. E. Millson (ed.), *Experimentation and Interpretation: The Use of Experimental Archaeology in the Study of the Past*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, p. 1–6

Preucel, R. W. & Mrozowski, S. A. (eds). 2010. *Contemporary Archaeology in Theory*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell

Trigger, B. G. 2006. *A History of Archaeological Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press